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AUTHOR Frankel, Judith; Mirsky, Norman
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ABSTRACT

The stereotype of the Jewish woman as presented in the media--either a female who controls through guilt and is overly concerned with food, or a woman who is an exotic, seductive individual torn between devotion to family and pursuit of private romantic goals--is discussed in this paper. Books by Norman Mailer, John Updike, Erica Jong and Phi ip Roth lend support to this stereotype. The sociohistorical background out of which this stereotype grew is examined briefly, and the role of the Jewish male is discussed. It is concluded that, in reality, the Jewish women is at the forefront of women's liberation, and there will come a time when the stereotype of the Jewish woman will no longer exist. (TS)

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"Changing Stereotype of Jewish Women in the Popular Culture"

Judith Frankel and Norman Mirsky

"She is, of course, fat, noisy, spoiled and anxious to the point of near-hysteria. She rules her husband and her children with the vigor of a marine drill-sergeant tempered only by enough malignant over-protective hovering to lull her victims into thinking that her bossing is benevolent and that her formidable presence is the family's sole shelter from the evils of the non-Jewish (and therefore hostile) world.

She is also, by and large, a fraud. For the popular conception of the Jewish wife and mother, sketched above and firmly imbedded in the public consciousness is no more authentic than a caricature drawn with something less than good taste.

Part folklore, part ancient ghetto history, part fiction fostered by puckish and imaginative Jewish novelists and comedians, the Jewish wife is, as we will document in these pages, the world's most libeled female. The fact is that 30 years ago the caricature that still makes people chuckle today contained more than a kernel of truth. Today it is absurdly obsolete."

"Where are you from?"

"New York."

"I mean your ancestors."

Polish Jews on one side, Russian on the other."

"I thought so. You look Jewish."

"And you look like an English anti-Semite."

"Oh come on--I like Jews."

"Some of your best friends..."

"It's just that Jewish girls are so bloody good in bed."

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"You're the only person I've ever met who thought I looked Jewish." (enough of sex--let's get back to bigotry.) "His thinking I looked Jewish actually excited me. God only knows why."

"Look, I'm not an anti-Semite, but you are--why do you think you don't look Jewish?"

"Because people always think I'm German, and I've spent half my life listening to anti-Semitic stories told by people who assumed I wasn't--"

These two quotes, the first from "The Jewish Wife" by Gwen Gibson Schwartz and Barbara Wyden, two non-Jews married to Jews, and the second from "Fear of Flying" by Erica Jong--a conversation between the heroine Isadora Wing--a Jewish woman married to a Chinese psycho-analyist and about to fly away with Adrian Goodlove, a British Langian and analyist reflect, I believe popular stereotypes of Jewish women in America.

It is not sufficient to say, as do Wyden and Schwartz, "that the Jewish wife is the world's most libelled female," nor is it adequate to explain Ms. Wing's horniness by accepting her description of her own mother, who represents the negative ego ideal of Wyden and Schwartz's Jewish wife.

To further quote Jong, "Of course it all began with my mother. My mother: Judith Stoloff White, also known as Jude. Not obscure. But hard to get down on paper. My love for her and my hate for her are so baffingly intertwined that I can hardly see her. I never know who is who. She is me and I am she and we are all together. The umbilical cord which connects us has never been cut so it has sickened and rotted and turned black. The very intensity of our need has made us denounce each other. We want to eat each other up. We want

to strangle each other with love. We want to run screaming from each other in panic before either of these things can happen.

When I think of my mother I envy Alexander Portnoy. If only I had a real Jewish mother--easily pigeonhold and filed away--a real literary property."

And further "What possibilities remained open to me? In what cramped corner could I act out what I so presumptuously called my life? I felt rather like those children of pot-smoking parents who become raging squares. I could, perhaps, take off across Europe with Adrian Goodlove, and never come home to New York at all."

Both mothers (the one in "The Jewish Wife" and the one delineated in "Fear of Flying") still persist as stereotypes presented in the media (the Jewish wife persists in Rhoda, the Heartbreak kid, Rhoda's mother, the monologues of Joan Rivers, the writings of Philip Rota, for example) while the Jong-Wing stereotype of both her mother and herself can be seen in the images of Maude, Barbra Streisand in "The Way We Were", the physician's mother in "The Gambler."

The Jewish woman as presented in the media is either a female who controls through guilt, is overly concerned with food (either by stuffing others or by weight watching), who exalts her son while enduring her husband and ignoring her female offspring until she becomes of marriageable age, or is presented as an exotic, seductive creative neurotic who is torn between devotion to family and pursuit of individual romantic goals be they sexual (as in Norman Mailer's Time of Her Time, Creative and Sexual as in Fear of Flying or ideological-sexual as in "The Way We Were" or Maude, or the Jewish woman in Updike's Couples).

The fact is that stereotypes of Jewish women in the media have altered very little over the past thrity years (with the possible exception of the demise of the immigrant, linguistic foibles, of Gertrude Berg's Molly Goldberg and Fred Allen's Mrs. Nusbaum).

Therefore, the question is why in the pace of a rapidly changing social climate do the stereotypes of the Jewish women persist in the media and persist, I might add, at the expense of the Jewish women's self-image.

Probing further, one must also ask if the stereotype presented in the pop culture reflects reality or is in fact geared to Jewish writers' accurate perception of the wish-fantasies of the mass audience, the majority of which is not Jewish?

Let us explore this question by examining the socio-historical background out of which the stereotypes grew. For the sake of brevity, it is necessary to limit ourselves to the Eastern European shtetl and the U.S. It is further necessary to make distinctions between fact and fancy, between wish and reality--distinctions which may be artificial, for wish often leads to reality which is magnified and simplified into stereotype which in turn is reacted against or acted out.

For example, in the shtetl there were religious laws, which I presume to represent male wishes, not easily broken because of the high visability that is the result of small town living. According to religious law women were entitled to some sexual gratification, to observe the rules of ritual purity which made their right to sexual gratification roughly commensurate with their likelihood of conception--a reverse rhythm system. The Jewish women were

recognized as creatures of strong libidos, as were Jewish men, who protected their wives from their neighbors, and vice versa by imposing upon the women laws of modesty in dress and virtual unsightliness in the eyes of man (though there are certain features that even a nun has difficulty hiding in an age with no bras or sunglasses).

Jewish women from wealthy families brought their father a bright son-in-law who could spend his days praying and studying which upped the possibility of both father-in-law and son-in-law of winning an appointment to a position in the Academy on High and insured the daughter of more frequent sexual gratification (since scholars are those obligated to give their wives pleasure most frequently) and since scholars did not have to leave home on long journeys to earn a living.

On the other hand, the shtetl being essentially a culture of poverty, the labor of most women and men was needed to sustain a household. The women had small gardens, bargained in the market place and often managed the family economy while the men often stayed away for long periods of time peddling and merchandising. Women, though suffering low status, were not without practical skills; this was all the more true in a society where Torah study was exalted and where pragmatics further mired one in the slime of this world.

History reminds us of the frequency of pogroms which left Jewish men unable to defend their wives from rape. As Richard Rubenstein has speculated in Power Struggle, there must have been no greater humiliation that a Jewish male could endure than to stand helplessly by while his wife, daughter, or sister was

being had by gentiles. Powerlessness led to projection which led to the defensive use of humor, which thinly masks the blaming of the victim while at the same time erotocizing her. "Let my mother go," the child pleaded with the Cossack. "Shut up," said the mother, "A pogrom is a pogrom!" Schooled in piety and pragmatism but not robbed of her sexuality, the Jewish woman left the shtetl for the ghettoes of America where her scholar husband lost his status, or her worker husband struggled to earn a living while learning a new language. Before marriage, she often found herself in a sweat shop where unprotected by the watchful eye of small community, she became the bosses' plaything.

In addition, the exotic, the foreigner, the stranger, no matter how lowly becomes the object of the Insider's lust. Vulnerable, free from oedipal taint, the outside woman becomes the erotic fantasy. Occasionally, if the Insider is powerful enough, his fantasy translates into a reality.

In the meanwhile, two seemingly opposing forces work in collusion. The oppressed, degraded Jewish male and the Oppressor work together to create a stereotype, the first in order to de-eroticize his woman while he himself conforms to the degraded image provided by the oppressor - the second in order to dehumanize the object of his oppression and his lust, and to render himself free from guilt.

As the Jew rose economically, he often did so at the expense of his and his woman's self-esteem. He frequently used the stereotype as a mask which permitted him to keep his opponent off guard. He belittled himself, laughed at himself, while subtly outwitting his non-Jewish or assimilated adversary. He remained on the outside, a middleman between lower and upper class gentiles.

Humor became both his defense and his offense. Reading the fantasy of his buyer, he was able with the emergence of movies, the radio and television to exploit the repressed wishes of the masses, be they upper, middle, or lower class. As a Jew on stage, he allowed the masses to laugh at him. As a Jew backstage, he laughed at the masses serving them up sex objects and the stuff of which nocturnal emmissions are made; sometimes testing the quality of the fantasy on the casting couch. Meanwhile, he was assigning Jewish females to another couch, that of the analyst.

For while all this was going on, the Jewish woman liberated from the religious law, the sweat shop and even the family business found herself the brunt of Jewish humor. She was treated like and became a princess. The apple of her father's eye, she was shielded, educated, cosmetesized (even surgically). Her enormous talends and her exotic sexuality had to be contained. But how to contain these? Hold before her the mirror the Horrible Jewish Mother, make her the object of her own derision. Let her education loose only in the company of other Jewish women. Organize her into Hadassahs, Sisterhoods, marry her off as quickly and well as possible, but keep her constantly off-guard, fearful of her homeliness, frightened of her unfeminine brightness. Maker he uncertain of how she is raising her children, keep her thinking she is too fat, too aggressive, too threatening to make her tolerable to anyone but a benign Jewish husband.

In fact, she was queen among women. In fantasy projected into stereotype she was a witch stuffing her children with food and devouring them with guilt.

And all this is functional to the Jewish male. He keeps his woman safely at home or in the company of Jewish women and children--no threat to the already

threatened masculinity of the Jewish male.

True, the Jewish woman is at the forefront of women's liberation. She sits on the House Judiciary Committee. She edits Ms. She writes the Feminine Mystique and Fear of Flying. She becomes a psychoanalyst (mainly of children). She founds Weight Watchers. She anchors an occasional television show.

But in the media in the pop culture she remains Portnoy's mother. Joan Rivers or Rhoda. She remains the castrating Brenda Potimkin, or the heartbroken kid. And who are we kidding? She remains that way in the media as she remained in the shtetl, the feared goddess Lillith--the sexual bomb that must be defused, first by Jewish law, then by Jewish stereotype because it is funny and because it is safe. The stereotyped Jewish woman is a saleable image, but why and for whom? There will come a time soon when she will shatter the mirror handed her by Jewish and non-Jewish society--and it is the Jewish male and the non-Jewish female who are in for years of bad luck!

While the ~~lady~~ body of the presentation represents a collaborative effort, I cannot fully agree with the conclusion Dr. Mirsky reaches on 2 grounds:

1. It is too optimistic to believe that Jewish women can throw off the role of stereotype pressed home so ingenuously by the media with the implicit support of American Jewish males and non-Jewish males and females. We Jewish women have bought into the image of Jewish mother, princess or siren to drop it so easily. To paraphrase a nasty cliche, never underestimate the power of a stereotype. (Perhaps when Israel settles down and produces something besides heroines to emulate, we'll have more of a chance).

2. We can't or shouldn't define Jewish women's role seperately from males roles- therefore, Women's Liberation - without People's Liberation is as frightening to me as "keeping women in their place."
Change to be functional, should come from all concerned with the effects of this change - both men and women.